

Wisdom through ignorance: Meno meets Socrates

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Whether encountering Socrates first-hand in Athens' marketplace as one of his fifth-century contemporaries or through one of Plato's works that immortalizes these encounters, people throughout the ages have been frustrated by this supposed wise man, who claims to know nothing. Here Daniel Silvermintz explores how Socrates uses questions to lead those with whom he is conversing to some form of wisdom.

Bewildered by Socrates

Whereas Socrates' contemporaries managed to silence this irritating individual by making him drink the poison hemlock, modern readers of Plato's dialogues continue to be flustered by his bewildering arguments that seem to turn everything upside-down. Contemporaries may have found particularly frustrating and puzzling Socrates' declaration during his famous trial that he was wiser than everyone else because he was the one man who knew that he knew nothing.

The same claim to uncertainty is made repeatedly through many of the Socratic dialogues presented by Plato – indeed a whole series of them has been called 'aporetic' (without answer) by scholars – and it can be no less frustrating to us than to Socrates' contemporaries. The whole point of Socrates' incessant questions seems to be to make us, along with him, profess to know nothing. These 'aporetic' dialogues typically depict Socrates teasing out various definitions of one of the virtues (e.g. courage, friendship, moderation, justice) from his discussion partners and subsequently showing them why each of these conceptions is inadequate. The dialogue will then conclude with Socrates declaring that the investigation has failed since they did not find what they were seeking, which makes us wonder why we, or anyone else, should spend valuable time reading the dialogues? The whole process may seem rather futile and we can perhaps begin to understand, if the aim is to disabuse us of all our previously held beliefs, why Socrates was accused in his trial of corrupting the young and subverting society.

Meno's perplexity

Meno, one of Socrates' more contentious discussion partners, testifies to his state of perplexity regarding the most basic principles of morality after just a brief interaction with Socrates:

For in truth I feel my soul and my tongue quite benumbed, and I am at a loss what answer to give you. And yet on countless occasions I have made abundant speeches on virtue to various people – and very good speeches they were, so I thought – but now I cannot say one word as to what it is. (Plato Meno 80b)

Even worse than merely wasting our time with someone who has nothing to teach us, Meno proclaims the harmful effects of his interaction with Socrates. Before meeting Socrates, Meno declares that he was a celebrated speaker on the very topic that he was discussing with Socrates, yet now is so confused that he feels as if he too knows nothing about the subject. Meno's reaction, ending up thoroughly confused and feeling that he knows less than when he started, is not unlike our own experience when first encountering the Socratic dialogues.

Although Meno had sought out Socrates and had initiated the discussion, he quickly tries to end the conversation once his ignorance has been exposed. The initially inquisitive Meno now turns to a personal assault against Socrates in which he compares the famed philosopher's ugly appearance and bewildering effects to the flat-faced torpedo fish. Moreover, Meno dismisses Socrates' reputation for being a man of wisdom with the charge that, in reality, he practises a form of sorcery that results in bewitching those with whom he comes in contact. After this invective,

Meno suggests that the whole investigation is a complete waste of time since one will never be able to know whether he has found what he is looking for when he does not know what it is in the first place. Since both Socrates and Meno admit that they do not know what virtue is with any degree of certainty, then continuing to search after it would seem to be a wild goose chase.

Leading Meno to the truth

If Socrates' intention were actually to corrupt Meno, he might have given up on him at this point in the discussion. Socrates, however, assures us during his trial that his real motive in questioning others comes out of a deep concern for them:

If any of you argues the point, and says he does care, I shall not let him go at once, nor shall I go away, but I shall question and examine and cross-examine him, and if I find that he does not possess virtue, but says he does, I shall rebuke him for scorning the things that are of most importance and caring more for what is of less worth. (Plato Apology 30a)

Although Meno claims to have made many fine speeches about virtue, he quickly reveals when pressed by Socrates that he considers virtue to be nothing other than power and money. Rather than trying to corrupt Meno, Socrates ruthlessly scrutinizes his beliefs in order to make him realize how damaging his own preconceptions are.

Although Socrates was quite effective in refuting Meno, it is not so clear where the bewildered Meno will now turn. His immediate expression of hostility suggests that if left to his own devices, he will simply dismiss Socrates and return to his previously held beliefs regardless of how misdirected they might be. Socrates responds to Meno's outburst with concern that he will become an even more vigorous proponent of immorality when faced with the uneasy task of discovering philosophically sound conceptions of morality. Looking past Meno's personal assault,

Socrates responds to Meno's paradox of inquiry by demonstrating to him how even an uneducated slave can solve a fairly complicated geometry problem that initially seems unsolvable. This is possible because the realm of geometry is governed by a realm of absolute truth, which anyone capable of thinking logically and rationally can access. Socrates' great contribution to western civilization is to convince us that this same rational order underlies the human sphere of psychology and ethics. He urges Meno to continue his inquiry after ethical notions with the assurance that he will ultimately find answers:

Most of the points I have made in support of my argument are not such as I can confidently assert; but that the belief in the duty of inquiring after what we do not know will make us better and braver and less helpless than the notion that there is not even a possibility of discovering what we do not know, nor any duty of inquiring after it — this is a point for which I am determined to do battle, so far as I am able, both in word and deed. (Meno 86b–c)

Although Meno may think that he has been corrupted, Socrates assures him that the investigation itself will make him a better person.

Joining Socrates' pursuit of wisdom

Even after having been shown how an uneducated slave can solve the geometry problem using only his own reasoning, the wealthy and educated Meno continues to insist that Socrates provide him with answers. Socrates instead continues to question Meno in the hope that he will think out the problem for himself. While we share Meno's frustration and impatience with Socrates' relentless questions and refusal to accept or even look for easy solutions, a world of universal truth awaits anyone who is willing to join him on the philosophic journey.

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